

# 8 Things First-Year Students Fear About College

By Mary Kay Shanley and Julia Johnston

**T**here's this little secret college-bound and first-year college students outwardly deny: They are scared sick about going off to college. In our interviews with 175 college students throughout the United States for *Survival Secrets of College Students* (Barron's, 2007) students talked—sometimes painfully—about what they wished they'd known ahead of time and what they would have done differently. In addition to fears about being smart enough, liking roommates, making friends, and missing home, students also worried about handling the party scene, having sex, covering costs, and being safe.

When asked what he worried about before getting to Grinnell College (IA), Ian Young said, "Whether I would make friends. Whether my roommate was going to be a weirdo. Whether I learned anything in high school."

Aaron Castro, heading to the United States Naval Academy (MD), said that at first leaving home to become surrounded by the unknown was a terrifying thought. And Sandra Lazo de la Vega, preparing to go to Florida Atlantic University's Wilkes Honors College, stewed about "[b]uying things. It seemed like all the stores were selling everything and I needed to get one of each color."

High school counselors and college representatives can help waylay students' fears throughout their senior year and first-year of college. (See sidebars.) First, though, the professionals need to be aware of what students really fear about the college experience—even while pretending to be all-wise, all the time.

## 1. Am I smart enough?

It doesn't matter whether students are heading to large public universities, small elite private colleges, or

somewhere else. They wonder if they are smart enough to continue the string of As and Bs, maybe Cs, they compiled in high school. The specter of Ds and Fs drifts around because students have heard college is really different—and much harder—than high school. Even students who had taken multiple AP classes were anxious because many other first-years also had a slew of APs. As one student told us: "Everybody is smart here. Can I make it?"

The students discovered after making it through the first college semester that the blueprint to academic success takes three things: organization, time management and getting to know professors. Your students need to know:

- A semester-long calendar created from syllabi on Day 1 of classes will work wonders—if it's followed.
- You often do not have to read every word of those 150-page assignments—once you learn how to scan, concentrate and read parts that seem important.
- If you take an 8 a.m. class, make sure it's in something that interests you, or you'll just go back to sleep.
- You can still lose nine pounds of hair stressing out over exams.

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## **2. Will my roommate be weird?**

Students show up, unpack a mountain of boxes, suitcases and maybe even a palm tree—and immediately start living with one or more strangers. Suddenly space is a rare commodity, quiet time is somewhere else, lights-out may be 10:00 p.m., 2:00 a.m. or both, and the roommate may have sleepovers with a significant other. Roommates may become best friends. More likely, they find ways to compromise and respect each other's space and needs, understanding that nothing is forever. Resident assistants (RAs) are trained to help smooth roommate differences and assist with other concerns. Your students need to know:

- If a roommate is physically or verbally threatening or abusive, talk to the RA and/or the dean of students immediately and request a change of housing. Parents also should be aware of what's going on.
- You don't have to be your roommate's mom and wake him or her for class.
- Having sex with someone while your roommate is in the room is rude.

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## **3. Where's my new best friend?**

First-year students arrive for orientation amid a bunch of other students the same age and equally scared. Even outgoing students who had a plethora of friends in high school felt intimidated. They mainly missed having someone who knew their back-story and could understand unspoken context of comments and ideas. In the puzzle about finding friends and community, one student noted that during her first week of college, whether to join a sorority "was more important and certainly more urgent than picking my major." Your students need to know:

- Orientation is "like summer camp on steroids" but do it anyway to meet one friend and find the dining hall.
- You can find friends even if you don't join the Greek system.
- Possessing a tool kit means you'll meet lots of people.
- New friends in the fall may not be the same friends you hang with in the spring.

## **4. Will I be okay without my folks, my dog and my car?**

Sometime that first semester—whether it's after the first three hours or the first three months—students will miss their own big bed in their own room, a normal-sized sink, not having to wear sandals to the shower, and a home-cooked meal. Angela Kinney at Saint Louis University (MO) said she wished she had known that "it's okay to have bad days and miss your family and to want to be home." As antidotes, some bury themselves in way too many activities while others do the opposite and hibernate with their books. Your students need to know:

- Not every day is going to be a big party and great fun.
- Something physical—Ultimate

Frisbee, crew, intramurals, yoga—lets you mix with others and work off stress.

- If homesickness sticks, go to the RA or the counseling center sooner rather than later.

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## **5. Where's the party?**

Parties happen at college. A lot. Colleges may ban alcohol on campus, limit parties serving alcohol to students of legal drinking age, and prohibit alcohol and illegal drugs in residence halls. But, students told us, you usually can find whatever substance you want, even if such usage is not the norm on campus. Sometimes bad things happen. One student told how he went out with acquaintances—not good friends—and woke up in the ER the next morning with alcohol poisoning. Students stressed, however, that you don't have to participate in the party scene to find friends who prefer other ways to have fun. Your students need to know:

- Not everyone parties to unconsciousness from Thursday through Sunday.
- Choosing a residence hall reputed

to be “social” rather than “the party dorm” means you control when to party.

- Sometimes telling someone you like him/her is facilitated by beer.
- Amazing people turn into foolish people or worse at alcohol-laden parties.

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## 6. Peer pressure for sex?

For sure. Luke Roth at Loyola University (IL) summed up the question about sex: “No matter whether you like it, you don't like it, you haven't had it, you have had it, you had it and don't do it that much anymore, you had it and now have it like a bunny—get used to it, because it happens, and it happens a lot.” A student's double room may become an informal triple, having sex will mean

### Counselor Katz

Cathy Katz is well aware of the fear factors that own college-bound high school seniors. A guidance counselor at Monta Vista High School, a high-achieving suburban school in Cupertino (CA), with 2,500 students in grades 9–12, close to 100 percent graduation rate and more than 90 percent of graduates college-bound, Katz says freshman year in college is “just the beginning of a whole new set of issues, concerns and problems these young adults will face.”

So where do those students go with the boatload of worries they acquire in freshman year—that things aren't going well on campus, that they aren't happy in college, that they feel like they've chosen the wrong school? “Well,” says Katz, “they're frightened to tell their parents, ‘I think I made a mistake,’ which is not surprising. These kids are trying to exert their independence and the last thing they want to say to their parents is, ‘Yeah, you were right about this or that.’ Kids don't feel like they are allowed the space for that.”

Whenever she gets the chance, Katz tells parents to spend one-on-one quality time with their student when she or he comes home from college for a fall visit. “At some point during their time home, parents need to create a discussion atmosphere that allows their child to segue into troublesome issues,” she says. “And instead of making their student feel like he or she has made mistakes, parents need to keep an open mind about what's being shared.

“They have to apply their problem-solving skills to very different situations now,” she continues. “If the student doesn't like a particular class, a certain teacher, their dorm room or roommates, parents need to hear the child out. You can't automatically assume this is nothing and that the student needs to get over it. There could be more to it, so listen to them, and ask open-ended questions and realize there probably isn't a pat answer.”

Parents need to remember it can also be okay to change one's mind about something, that there are multiple pathways to a goal. For example, maybe a particular college wasn't for their student after all. Indeed, one Montana native said she transferred from her Midwestern college to the University of Montana because she was “homesick for the land.”

There is a point, though, where parents can get too involved with their child's life. Says Katz, “Kids going off to college have to make their own decisions. Parents can hope they've equipped them with good skills to do that, can listen to them, can be open-minded and should remember that the resources students need are at their college. But the student, for the most part, needs to be the one doing the deciding.”

### Something to Consider:

Guidance counselors can be effective throughout the year in short conversations with individuals, small groups of students, or parent meetings anytime during senior year. A panel of high school alumni, now college students, can answer questions and relate personal experiences. A short handout of the top 10 things students need to know for college survival can be available all senior year and at graduation assemblies.

### **Dean Low**

Beverly Low may be more aware of incoming students' fears than they would ever suspect. The dean of first-year students at Colgate University in Hamilton (NY), Low has responsibility for approximately 800 students annually.

"I hear a fair amount of 'I shouldn't be here' and 'I can't cut it' early in fall semester," Low says. "Those students are talking about cutting it both academically and socially."

Colgate and, most likely, almost every other school in the country, has an extensive network of support for incoming students and their parents. "We tell students to 'show up, speak up and reach out,'" Low says. "That means be responsible for yourself. Frankly, a lot of problems arise because new students don't know how to advocate for themselves. That's the reason those '8 Fears' are right on target."

Low says students have a romantic notion of college and by October the majority of conversations begin with, "This is not what I thought college would be like. It's not meeting my expectations."

"They know college is harder than high school, but it's not the 13th grade," she explains. "It's a whole new ballgame. Students have gone from a lot of structure to very little structure. Now they're boss, making the choices. And the consequences of their choices will determine how well they do."

The real problem, says Low, is that students should learn how to show up, speak up and reach out before they get to college. "Keeping a curricular calendar, scheduling your own dental appointments, setting up and adhering to a weekly budget, having a part-time job because you have to go to work even when you don't feel like it—those are responsibilities parents should turn over to their high school students."

But colleges don't deal with parents of high school students, so Low says Colgate is "very up front with the parents here. We tell them we will work really hard to support and challenge their students appropriately. But we are not going to swoop in and fix things for them. We say, 'There are times your child will struggle and that is okay.'"

Low says Colgate's goal is to establish good partnerships with parents. "For example, if parents call, we might feed them a couple of lines to use to help their student move to the next level."

"But when they call because their daughter is having roommate adjustment issues and they want us to intervene, we say the daughter needs to talk with her roommate and her RA."

Low's department tries to be transparent with families. "We tell them if we rush in to fix everything for the students, we are robbing them of a great education. Some of life's best lessons are learned by making major mistakes."

### **Something to Consider:**

- Incoming students receive *So This Is Colgate*, a publication of tips on just about everything. It's written by Colgate students, encouraging the new students to adopt the show up, speak up, reach out mentality and to be vocal.
- What if college applications included a way to find out: Have you ever had to overcome adversity? How do you deal with disappointment/discomfort? Do you have a work ethic? Are you resilient?

different things to different people, and, like alcohol, bad things can happen to the uninformed or naïve. Your students need to know:

- Hooking up really is an individual choice.
- Practicing abstinence is not an anomaly.
- What you will accept and what you want from any relationship, and say so.
- It's better to go home alone rather than hook up with someone who only likes you when you are drunk.

### **7. Where's the money?**

Your wallet is like a sieve, your bank account is overdrawn—again—and your folks say you are on your own. Money, how to get it, spend it, and have enough is a huge issue, especially with escalating tuition costs. Your students need to know:

- Cheaper books, cheaper meals, cheaper fun—they really exist.
- The best jobs allow you to study at work and have flexible scheduling to study for tests.
- Credit cards have a limit for a reason.
- Leaving the car home avoids filling the tank, maintenance bills, and campus parking tickets that must be paid to graduate.

### **8. Is it safe here?**

The reality is that it's almost impossible to have a totally crime-free campus environment. While security issues vary from campus to campus, student safety is a major focus for all institutions. Security information and phone numbers will be given verbally and in written materials at first-year student orientation. The students interviewed issued strong advice on how to be safe at parties, on campus grounds, and in the residence hall room. Male and female students

A significant message for students is that despite their fears, college can provide a safety net—within reason—to experience, make mistakes, learn and move forward intellectually and socially.

especially cautioned first-year students about being the victim of or charged with date rape. Regardless of the setting, students must use basic street smarts. Your students need to know:

- Putting your drink down in a social setting is a bad idea; if you do, get yourself a new drink; always get your own drinks.
- The good friends in your party group should take turns not drinking and watch out for the rest of you.
- “Lock it or lose it” is the message for personal property, including the laptop in your room.
- Programming campus security’s number into your cell immediately is very smart.

A significant message for students is that despite their fears, college can provide a safety net—with reason—to experiment, make mistakes, learn and move forward intellectually and socially. A Brandeis University (MA) student talked about how during her first semester at college she “made bad choices, hooked up with guys, was messy, drinking too much.” She didn’t much like that person. She decided to change, try new things, and find the person she really wanted to be.

MARY KAY SHANLEY and JULIA JOHNSTON are co-authors of *Survival Secrets of College Students* (Barron’s, 2007). They also co-authored *Best Answers to the 201 Most Frequently Asked Questions about Getting into College* (McGraw Hill). Shanley has written six other books, is a public speaker and conducts writing workshops, including the prestigious University of Iowa Summer Writing Festival. Johnston is a freelance writer and has taught at Drake University Law School (IA) and at juvenile shelters. Both live in West Des Moines (IA).



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